

On Time, On Target: FA NCOES Transformation and Expansion

By CSM Dean J. Keveles, FA

The article “NCOES—Restoring NCO Core Competency,” in the July-September 2008 edition of *Fires Bulletin*, laid out evidence of the atrophy of Field Artillery (FA) core competencies across the entire Branch. Healing the FA is a priority at the FA School at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. This article discusses the NCO Education System (NCOES) transformation and expansion designed to address this critical core-competency atrophy.

Background. The past seven years of nonstandard deployments for fires battalions and brigades created a large knowledge gap in conducting core Artillery missions as dictated by the core mission essential task list (CMETL). A detailed analysis done by the cadre of the US Army NCO Academy (NCOA) and the Directorate of Training and Doctrine (DOTD), both at Fort Sill, revealed a disturbing number of NCOs unable to perform the critical tasks of their current, and often previous, skill levels.

Data was collected from various sources, such as the observer/controllers at the three combined arms training centers, Fort Sill Quality Assurance Office pre- and post-course surveys, Fort Sill NCOA small-group leaders’ observations, concerns of NCOES students, feedback from the leadership in the field, etc. This loss of core skills is not the fault of the operational units, as they are performing nonstandard missions tasked to them in support of wartime tactical, operational and strategic goals.

On 2 July 2008, General (GEN) William S. Wallace, then Commanding General, Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), was briefed on the observations of our Branch’s dilemma and given enough evidence for him to agree that our NCOES needed to expand to close the skill gap that was ever-widening. With almost no hesitation, he agreed

that expanding was the right thing to do for our NCO Corps.

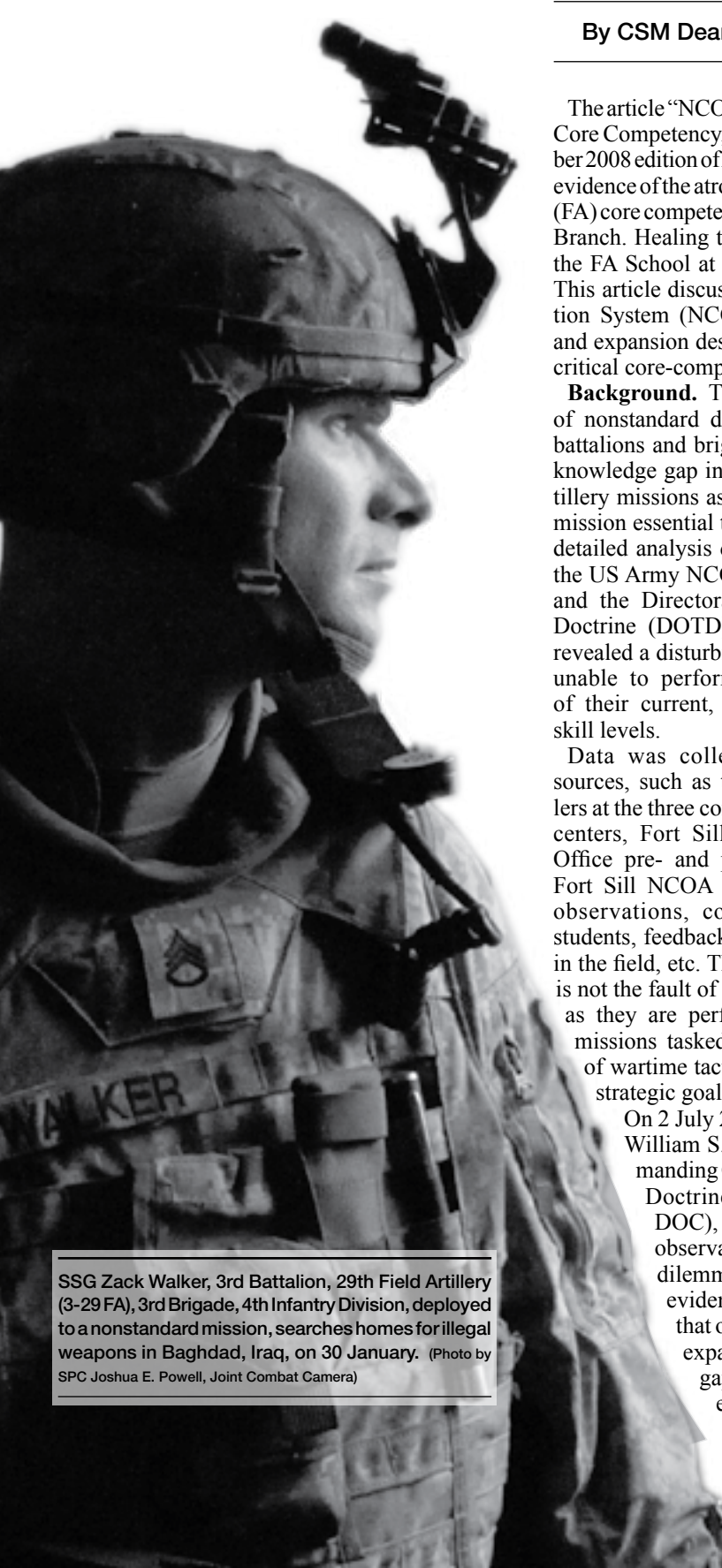
Major General Peter M. Vangjel, Commanding General, Fires Center of Excellence (CoE) and Fort Sill, provided his guidance in the recently published draft Field Artillery Campaign Plan (FACP)—in which Phase II has a main effort geared toward the restoration of core competencies. The draft FACP can be downloaded from the Army Knowledge Online (AKO) Fires Knowledge Network (FKN) Website homepage at <https://www.us.army.mil/suite/doc/12513785>.

This guidance gives the Fort Sill NCOA and DOTD the primary direction to use as much training time as possible on military occupational skill (MOS) critical tasks in the NCOES to restore FA core competencies in our NCOs. TRADOC emphasized the need to develop a plan and identify those critical tasks for training in the institutional courses while not exceeding eight weeks for any one NCOES course.

Course Transformation. Our NCOES is undergoing the greatest transformation ever. By direction of Headquarters, TRADOC, all NCOAs will transform the Basic NCO Course into the Advanced Leader Course (ALC) and the Advanced NCO Course (ANCOC) into the Senior Leader Course (SLC) no later than 1 October 2009. This transformation is more than a name change. It has a greater focus of “teaching a level up.”

Tasks. In other words, some tasks will either “migrate down” or be included and discussed within lessons of a lower-level course. ALC will focus on squad, crew and team tasks, but include sergeant first class-level tasks. SLC will focus on platoon-level tasks, but also will address battery-level tasks. The FA NCOES will integrate 35 hours of First Sergeant Course tasks into SLC.

The particular tasks selected for inclusion were derived by feedback from FA command sergeants major (CSMs) across the field. In October 2008, CSM Joseph D. Smith, CSM of the FA, provided the list of First Sergeant Course tasks recommended for inclusion (87 hours worth) from the 2008 US Army Sergeant Major Academy Commandants’ Conference Working Group. He posed a question to the field, “What tasks from this list would



SSG Zack Walker, 3rd Battalion, 29th Field Artillery (3-29 FA), 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, deployed to a nonstandard mission, searches homes for illegal weapons in Baghdad, Iraq, on 30 January. (Photo by SPC Joshua E. Powell, Joint Combat Camera)

you want an NCO graduating from SLC, currently known as ANCOG, to be trained on should you want that graduate to be a first sergeant immediately, knowing there may not be a First Sergeant Course for them to attend in the future.” Almost all CSMs responded with the same tasks requested for inclusion.

Technology. Next was the need to leverage as much technology as possible. The NCOA continuously looks for simulations that provide valuable training opportunities for our courses that reduce risks of injury and reduce costs in a time of belt-tightening. One such technology that will be incorporated into both ALC and SLC is the Virtual Experience Immersive Learning Simulation (VEILS), which is currently in use with some of the Officer Education System (OES) courses.

VEILS is an interactive program that gives an NCO the opportunity to improve real-world performance by exploring hypothetical situations and the process of making decisions. In this program, a student becomes the lead character in an interactive movie, makes leadership decisions in both garrison and combat scenarios and sees the consequences of the choices he selects. This training product exercises and improves the decision-making skills of our NCOs through a balance of known experiences with exposure to new situations and scenarios, mixed with discussions of selected solutions among peers in the classroom. This product helps create more adaptive leaders able to perform their leadership, technical and tactical duties with greater confidence.

Between five and 10 hours of VEILS will be added to the FA ALC and SLC. The NCOA also will continue to use simulations already available at Fort Sill, such as the Joint Fires and Effects Trainer System (JFETS), Joint Conflict and Tactical Simulation (JCATS) and the Call for Fire Trainer, and explore new and emerging technologies that enhance instruction, such as 3-D Model Simulation Programs.

Standards. Because a majority of core competencies are at an all-time low due to the many nonstandard deployments, NCOES instructors are spending valuable training time trying to validate 10- and 20-level tasks with students. To ensure students attending NCOES courses retain what they learn, the FACP directs that instructional testing be geared toward mastery of skills, rather than familiarization and proficiency. This will be accomplished by the requirement to

Existing Course Title	Course Length	Transformation Course Title	Course Length
Field Artillery (FA) Cannon Section Chief Basic NCO Course (BNCOC)	3 Weeks, 3 Days	13B Advanced Leader Course (ALC)	5 Weeks
FA Platoon Sergeant Advanced NCO Course (ANCOG)	4 Weeks, 1 Day	13B Senior Leader Course (SLC)	7 Weeks
FA Tactical Data Systems Specialist BNCOC	6 Weeks, 1 Day	13D ALC	6 Weeks, 2 Days
FA Tactical Data Systems Specialist ANCOG	3 Weeks, 2 Days	13D SLC	4 Weeks, 4 Days
Fire Support Sergeant BNCOC	3 Weeks, 3 Days	13F ALC	5 Weeks, 4 Days
Fire Support Sergeant ANCOG	4 Weeks, 2 Days	13F SLC	8 Weeks
Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) Section Chief BNCOC	3 Weeks	13M ALC	4 Weeks
MLRS Platoon Sergeant ANCOG	1 Week, 3 Days	13M SLC	4 Weeks, 4 Days
MLRS Operations/Fire Direction Section Chief BNCOC	2 Weeks, 4 Days	13P ALC	3 Weeks
MLRS Operations/Fire Direction Senior Sergeant ANCOG	2 Weeks	13P SLC	4 Weeks, 4 Days
FA Radar Section Chief BNCOC	4 Weeks, 1 Day	13R ALC	7 Weeks
FA Senior Radar/Targeting Sergeant ANCOG	5 Weeks, 4 Days	13R SLC	8 Weeks
FA Surveyor Section Chief BNCOC	3 Weeks, 4 Days	13S ALC	4 Weeks
FA Survey Senior Sergeant ANCOG	2 Weeks	13S SLC	3 Weeks, 4 Days
FA Meteorological Section Sergeant BNCOC	2 Weeks, 2 Days	13W ALC	3 Weeks
FA Meteorological Section Leader ANCOG	1 Week, 3 Days	13W SLC	3 Weeks, 3 Days
FA Cannon Section Chief BNCOC Mobile Training Team (MTT)	2 Weeks, 3 Days	13B ALC (MTT)	2 Weeks, 3 Days
Fire Support Sergeant BNCOC (MTT)	2 Weeks, 3 Days	13F SLC (MTT)	3 Weeks, 4 Days

NCO Education System Transformation

obtain a passing score of 90 percent on all exams. This falls back to the need for NCO self-development. To be successful, NCOs attending NCOES courses will need to prepare themselves better, conduct more research during personal time and form study groups in the evenings and weekends.

Under the new administration, and a recently signed Status of Forces Agreement with the Iraqi government, we will begin to draw down from Iraq. Many units will have more dwell time at home station to train on their CMETL, even with a build-up of forces in Afghanistan. As students begin to show greater proficiency in skills that support the critical tasks we teach in NCOES, the NCOA and DOTD can begin to create more challenging exams to meet the FACP's intent of mastery. At that point, we will explore the possibility of going to closed book exams for better retention while maintaining the 90 percent passing standard for exams in lethal and nonlethal fires critical skills.

Course Expansion. By the additions to the courses as part of the transformation, all courses for all MOS in NCOES will expand (see the figure). Some will grow by one day and others by as long as four weeks. Our efforts will meet the FACP's "Reset" and "Sustain Soldiers, Leaders and Families" lines of effort, by adding more critical tasks to each course and spend more time on critical tasks already a part of each course curriculum.

Due to the nature, operational requirements, and operations tempo (OPTEMPO) of the current fight, the FA cannot depend on all three pillars of training (self development, institutional training and operational assignments) to develop our Soldiers and leaders. Institutional training must be the center-point of core-competency maintenance and sustainment. NCOs will regain individual knowledge and confidence in their specific MOS skill sets that allow them to return to the operational force and retrain individual,

section, team and organizational technical and tactical competence.

One of the challenges to expanding the course was to ensure all FANCOs within the Reserve Component (RC) could complete the new requirements successfully within their limited drill times. It has been noted that although RC FA NCOs have been performing nonstandard missions also, their problem set is slightly different. RC core-skill atrophy has been noted as less severe because Army National Guard (ARNG) Artillery battalions tend to spend more time together as crews and teams than do the active Army Soldiers, who change duty stations more often.

The norm seems to be that ARNG Artillery crews and teams seem to know each other better over longer periods of time and return to or maintain their crew and battle-drill proficiency better. When observing ARNG Artillery NCO students attending the active Army FA NCOES courses, these NCOs are professional to the point that the cadre cannot tell whether students are active or RC other than by their student packets.

Instructional Methodology Change. Outcome-Based Training and Education (OBTE) is a methodology that focuses the student on the desired end state (outcome) of the training objective at the beginning of the lesson. Soldiers understand the parameters and constraints, their own weaknesses and strengths as pertaining to the particular training session, and learn the “why” and the “how” of the task. They use or develop their critical thinking skills to arrive at the desired outcome in performing the task. In a context that many leaders can relate to from the way we have trained for decades past—it is understanding the terminal learning objective as the outcome and knowing those enabling learning objectives that lead to the desired outcome.

Understanding how something works or why a certain step is performed leads to Soldiers’ being able to reach the desired outcome better than just training by repetition within the task, condition and standards. Having Soldiers demonstrate the outcome and understand how they arrived at that end is what counts. By using an adaptive leader methodology, the institutional courses can build critical-thinkers who are more adaptive to varying conditions and can build greater mastery of skills.

The Asymmetric Warfare Group, Fort Meade, Maryland, developed a Combat Application Training Course to help instructors understand the OBTE method.

The Quality Assurance Office at Fort Sill is developing a training support package (TSP) that will become an integral part of the Army Basic Instructor Course to ensure all new instructors are familiar with OBTE and apply it to the courses they instruct. The Fort Sill NCOA plans to incorporate this TSP into the NCOES courses to help students understand the methodology. Understanding the OBTE will help them do better in the courses they are attending, and, more importantly, will help them understand their own instructional styles better when training their Soldiers in the operational units. Eventually, the goal will be to indoctrinate the entire force with this instructional methodology, so a new generation of NCOs and trainers will be teaching by means of OBTE and adaptive leader methodology.

Self-Development. This transformation and expansion of our FANCOES courses are “on time and on target.” However, to regain and maintain proficiency in their core skills, or to build new skills, it is imperative that NCOs take responsibility for their own self-development. This can be accomplished only by self-study, training of themselves and the Soldiers in their charge, and conducting research to stay current. There are vast amounts of training tools, information and data available to all NCOs on the FKN maintained by the FA School at <https://www.us.army.mil/suite/grouppage/93053>.

Those students who reviewed the TSPs available on the Fires CoE Reach Back Training Website (https://firescoe.sill.army.mil/index_FA.htm) were prepared and did better in their courses at the Fort Sill NCOA than those students who did not prepare. These NCOs further refined their skills during attendance in NCOES. Many of these TSPs are covered in the institutional courses at Fort Sill. Students can use these lessons to prepare for the Fort Sill NCOA or functional courses, to train Soldiers/crews/teams at home station, and also to prepare units for training in support of their CMETL.

The Fort Sill School also offers Reset mobile training teams that can provide support to commanders who request them in support of unit training objectives and Reset of skills at various levels. Information about requesting such training is available on FKN at <https://www.us.army.mil/suite/page/584601>.

Another medium of self-development is the newly implemented Structured Self-Development Program (SSDP) as a Web-based medium of lessons using Blackboard. For many NCOs who have

taken online college classes, this will be a similar method of instruction. SSDP will become a mandatory phase of the institutional courses for successful graduation at each level of NCOES.

A note of interest to many readers is the integration of the Air Defense Artillery (ADA) NCOES courses into the Fort Sill NCOA. The Fort Sill NCOA will be renamed the Fires CoE NCOA with both FA and ADA NCOs attending their NCOES courses at one academy. This integration is a part of the Base Realignment and Closure commission’s decision to move the ADA School from Fort Bliss, Texas, to Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

This integration is not a merging of the Branches, but the creation of the Fires CoE. Both the FA and the ADA Branches will explore possible efforts of synergy between one another. As a part of this integration and effort of synergy, the ADA DOTD agreed that the same First Sergeant Course material would be added to their SLC curriculum as well.

This is the greatest change to NCOES that has ever been documented. The institutional pillar of leadership will change to meet the intent of the TRADOC-directed transformation to ALC and SLC in teaching a “level up.” It will meet the FA Chief’s intent in the FACP to regain core competencies and move toward mastery of critical skills, while simultaneously implementing a new instructional methodology through OBTE, and it will express the obligation of self-development for all NCOs. In this “Year of the NCO,” NCOs must take education and life-long learning very seriously for the success of our Branch and our Army. Transformation and expansion of the NCOES courses is at a time of critical need for our Branch so our NCOs will remain the Backbone of the Army.

Command Sergeant Major (CSM) Dean J. Keveles, Field Artillery (FA), is the Commandant of the US Army NCO Academy, Fires Center of Excellence, at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. He served as the Battalion CSM of 1st Battalion, 22nd Field Artillery (1-22 FA), 434th FA Brigade, Fort Sill; CSM of the 3-29 FA, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, Fort Carson, Colorado; and also as Task Force Pacesetter CSM, deploying in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom 05-07. He also has served as the School Chief/First Sergeant (1SG) of the Advanced NCO Course, US Army NCO Academy; 1SG of Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, 212th FA Brigade; and 1SG of A Battery, 6-32 FA, all at Fort Sill.